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Perceptions of middle school assessment: an ecological view

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Background: The ecology of physical education is created through the interaction of three task systems: managerial task system, instructional task system, and the student social system. Within the ecological framework tasks are presented and task development is influenced by concepts such as ambiguity, risk, and accountability. Teachers’ and students’ perceptions of assessment tasks have been examined to some extent in physical education; however, they have not been investigated through an ecological lens.

Purpose of study: The purpose of this study was to examine middle school students’ and their teacher’s perceptions of assessment through an ecological lens in order to investigate how assessment influenced both the teacher’s and the students’ agenda in the classroom.

Setting: The research took place in a suburban middle school located in the western part of Massachusetts.

Participants: Participants were an intact class of 36 seventh-grade students and their teacher.

Research design: Qualitative case study.

Data collection and analysis: Data were collected in four ways: (a) videotaped record of each lesson, (b) field notes, (c) formal interviews using a semi-structured interview guide and (d) documents. Field notes and interview data were inductively analyzed using constant comparison. Categories were developed and examined for common elements that ran through and tied them together. Themes were then extracted from these categories. Data were selectively coded for examples that illustrated the themes.

Results: Three main findings are reported. First, students’ perceptions of assessment were influenced by the ambiguity of what was being assessed and the lack of risk associated with their level of performance on the assessments. Although ambiguity was present, there was little to no risk because students were not held formally accountable by a grade exchange for assessment tasks. Second, since the assessments were not used as a form of formal accountability (i.e., not linked to a grade) the students did not value assessment. Furthermore, the teacher did not value assessment tasks because she was not held accountable to assess student learning. Finally, the student social system impacted students’ perceptions of assessment. The students wanted to have fun and many believed assessments were not fun, rather they were boring. Students also perceived that working with their friends to do assessments resulted in more effort because students wanted to work and socialize with their friends, as well as perform the skills correctly in front of their friends.

Conclusions/recommendations: Specific recommendations for practice include designing assessments that are implemented in the context of the activity. Assessments may be more effective as well as meaningful to students if physical educators are able to design assessments that incorporate students’ agendas of working with friends and having fun. Future research should be conducted at other...
educational levels to further ascertain the role of assessment tasks in the ecology of physical education at these levels.

Keywords: assessment; ecology; student social system

Student perceptions about physical education have been recently explored; however, a paucity of research regarding student voice still exists. Graham (1995) writes that physical education as a profession does not know how students feel about their physical education programs in terms of what they like, do not like, value, or would like to have included or excluded in their programs.

Student perceptions regarding assessment in physical education have also recently been explored (James, Griffin, and France 2005). Results indicated that students believed that assessment tasks enabled them to understand what the teacher wanted them to learn and, as well, that assessment tasks made them work harder to improve their performance. Student perceptions about fitness testing as an assessment tool have also been explored. Results indicated that students often do not have a clear understanding as to why they perform fitness tests in physical education. In addition, students perceived fitness test items to be painful and often looked for ways to avoid taking fitness tests (Flohr and Williams 1997; Hopple and Graham 1995).

Student perceptions about assessment in physical education are further complicated by the fact that assessment is infrequently used by physical education teachers. Historically, teachers have stated several reasons for the lack of assessment in physical education instruction including lack of time, lack of administrative accountability (i.e. teachers learn they can get by without doing assessment), too many students, lack of professional preparation, and beliefs that assessment is not necessary in physical education (Hensley 1990; Kneer 1986; Lund 1993; Veal 1988a). Although research results indicate that there are several reasons that lead teachers to not embrace assessment in physical education, results also indicate that some teachers believe assessment improves the teaching/learning environment as well as their ability to reflect about their content and instruction (James, Griffin, and France 2005).

One way to examine students’ perceptions of assessment is through an ecological lens. The ecology of physical education provides a framework for understanding what happens in a physical education classroom. This framework takes into account the fact that what teachers do in a classroom influences students and conversely, what students do also influences their teachers.

Ecologies in general typically consist of several systems that interact with each other in a way that what happens in one system influences what happens in the other systems. The ecology of physical education is comprised of three task systems, which are developed around a series of tasks to be accomplished. These systems are the instructional task system, managerial task system and the student social system (Hastie and Siedentop 1999). The instructional task system is related to the content that is being taught. Examples of instructional tasks would be participating in drills and game play, as well as the teaching of appropriate sporting behavior, important to effectively participating in games.

The managerial task system includes tasks that relate to the behavioral and organizational aspects of physical education, the non-subject matter functions that are imperative if learning is to be accomplished over time (Siedentop and Tannehill 2000). The managerial task system includes both the actual management of materials and space along with the
establishment and maintenance of appropriate behavior (Doyle 1986; Siedentop 1988). Examples of managerial tasks include transitioning from one activity to another, getting and returning equipment and taking roll.

While the managerial and instructional task systems are largely teacher-directed, the social system is primarily arranged and directed by students who clearly have a social agenda when they come to physical education (Allen 1986; Carlson and Hastie 1997; Jones 1992). This agenda in physical education might include having fun with a friend while taking part in a basketball drill or stopping participation in a task to talk with friends about their plans for the evening.

The three task systems interact to create a program of action. The program of action is embedded in activities teachers and students enact together as they accomplish academic work. It has a specific direction and momentum, which determines appropriate behaviors for students during instruction. In essence, the program of action draws events and participants in the classroom toward the completion of specific tasks (Doyle 1986).

The program of action is a dynamic vector that encompasses instruction, order; the agenda a teacher has for the lesson and appropriate student responses and interactions necessary for the vector to maintain momentum and direction. Students often initiate secondary vectors that are created through social tasks that are influenced by the students’ agenda. Students’ agendas generally have two goals: (a) to socialize and have fun and (b) to achieve a passing grade while performing a minimal amount of work (Allen 1986). Students initiate secondary vectors to influence the program of action and to test the strength of the program of action, as well as, reveal possible openings for their personal agendas. In addition to defining the predictability of the social system of the class through secondary vectors, students can also estimate the stringency of the academic accountability in the class (Doyle 1986).

Student social tasks that create the secondary vectors are not announced publicly and then pursued; nonetheless, these tasks are communicated among students in subtle ways that may result in student social tasks interacting with other task systems that may weaken the program of action. Although it is possible for the student social system to weaken the intended program of action, it is also possible that it can support the other task systems and strengthen the program of action (Carlson and Hastie 1997; Hastie 2000).

There are many important concepts in the ecological framework in addition to the program of action and the three task systems. Accountability is an important concept because without accountability, there is no task (Doyle 1986). Accountability comes in different forms. Students can be held accountable by grades, teacher monitoring and supervision, public performance and records of performance. Typically in physical education students are held accountable for socializing at a level that is within the boundaries of the managerial and instructional task systems (Siedentop and Tannehill 2000). Furthermore, performance expectations (i.e. what students are held accountable for) are seldom defined with adequate specificity, leading to ambiguity.

Ambiguity is another important concept in the ecological framework along with the concept of risk. Ambiguity is a result of gaps in information about performance expectations. Risk refers to the stringency of the evaluative criteria a teacher uses and the likelihood that these criteria can be met on a given occasion (Doyle 1983).

Students may attempt to negotiate task demands in situations where there is a high degree of risk and ambiguity (Doyle 1979, 1986, 1992). Negotiations by students result in attempts to change tasks, to change the conditions under which tasks are performed, or to change the performance standards by which tasks are judged (Doyle 1986; Siedentop and Tannehill 2000).
From the students’ perspective, what tasks they are held accountable for in exchange for a grade defines the structure of academic tasks for a given classroom. The demands of these tasks influence how information is learned and the types of responses that students generate in response to the demands of the tasks. As a result, the way tasks are structured influences the possibility of students receiving a favorable grade. The differences in task structures are related to ambiguity and risk, that is, some tasks are structured to contain low ambiguity and low risk; while others have high ambiguity and risk. Furthermore, some tasks are structured to have high ambiguity and low risk and create a ‘no task’ task structure in which no one really knows what to do, but it doesn’t matter because any answer is acceptable (Doyle 1979).

Although ecology and assessment in physical education settings have been investigated separately, the significance of this research lies in the fact that prior research in the ecology of physical education has ignored assessment and previous assessment research has ignored the ecology. In order to address this gap in the research, the purpose of this study was to examine middle school students’ and their teacher’s perceptions of assessment through an ecological lens in order to investigate how assessment influenced both the teacher’s and the students’ agenda in the classroom.

Methods
Setting and participants
The study was conducted in an affluent suburban middle school located in the western part of Massachusetts. The middle school population was comprised of 376 students in grades 6–8. Students in the middle school were similar in both socio-economic status (upper class) and ethnicity (Caucasian). The suburb in which the school was located had some of the highest Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Test scores (high stakes statewide testing at the 4th, 8th, and 10th grade levels with high school graduation contingent on passing scores on the 10th grade version) in the state.

Entry to the site required gaining institutional review board approval to conduct the research as well as district approval from the district superintendent, informed consent to participate from parents and teachers, and assent from students. Pseudonyms were used throughout this paper to protect participants’ anonymity. Participants included an intact class of 36 seventh-grade students (17 females; 19 males) and their physical education teacher, Mrs Nelson (pseudonym), who had taught for six years.

Data collection
As a non-participant observer (LeCompte and Preissle 1993), the lead author observed the seventh-grade class several times over a four-month period. Data were collected in four ways: (a) videotaped record of each lesson, (b) field notes as well as expanded field notes informed by videotape, (c) formal interviews with the teacher and selected students and (d) documents. Data collection began with several visits in which a rapport was developed with the teacher and students through informal discussions. The goal of these visits was to allow the researcher to become part of the fabric of the class and to reduce researcher influence on student behavior.

Observations were conducted during two units of instruction within a multi-activity curriculum. The fitness unit was 10 lessons long and consisted of fitness activities
that focused on health-related fitness and the Fitnessgram fitness tests as assessments.

The second unit, volleyball, consisted of seven lessons that focused on skill development and working together as a team. The assessments were a combination of peer assessments and teacher-directed assessments that included checklists and written quizzes. Observations were conducted for 50 minutes twice a week for a total of 100 minutes per week over 12 weeks.

**Field notes**

Field notes were written during and immediately after each observation. Observational data included both descriptive and reflective notes from observing both units. Descriptive notes from observations focused on events that occurred in the gymnasium, particularly in regard to assessment and the ecology of physical education. Field notes regarding the ecology were recorded in a fashion that organized the events that occurred in each of the task systems into individual columns on paper.

In addition, each lesson was videotaped to obtain a visual record of the lesson to enhance field notes and also provide an accurate record of classroom events. The video camera was placed on a tripod in a corner of the gymnasium allowing a view of the students and teacher from the widest angle. In each videotaped lesson the teacher wore a wireless microphone to enhance vocal clarity. Audio portions of the recorded videotapes were transcribed and used to support field notes taken during live observations.

**Interviews**

Both the physical education teacher and 10 students participated in two semi-structured formal interviews. A pre-unit interview with the teacher explored her viewpoints about assessment, the process for planning the units, and how each unit was to be conducted. Information gathered from the pre-unit interview was essential because it was the only way to gather knowledge of the teacher’s goals, learning activities, and assessments because she did not write out detailed lesson plans. The post-unit interview examined the teacher’s perceptions of assessment in the two units as well as how assessment facilitated the teaching–learning process. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes.

In addition to the formal interviews, informal interviews between the teacher and the researcher were recorded promptly after the conversation had taken place. These interviews usually focused on assessment and were useful for addressing researcher questions. Interview data were also collected through two formal semi-structured individual interviews with 10 students (five girls; five boys). Students were selected for interviews through a stratified random process based on gender and skill level, which was predetermined by the physical education teacher. Students’ pre-unit interviews (10–15 minutes) focused on their perceptions of the activities in which they participated and their perceptions of assessment in physical education. The post-unit interview (20–25 minutes) focused on students’ perceptions of assessment (i.e. what they thought about assessment) in the two units of instruction. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis**

Data analyses were ongoing throughout the data collection process. Interview transcripts and observational field notes were inductively coded using constant comparative methods.
( Strauss and Corbin 1998) to search for differences and similarities, which were developed into categories. Once categories were established, themes were identified that cut across several categories. Data were then selectively coded for examples that illustrated the themes (Neuman 1994).

Data trustworthiness

Data trustworthiness was established in three ways. First, triangulation was used across data sources including field notes, teacher interviews and student interviews. Second, through prolonged and regular engagement between the investigator and the participants. Finally, observations and interview data were examined to identify areas of similarity and dissimilarity between teacher and student perceptions (Merriam 2001).

Results

The results provide an ecological perspective in that they reflect the dual directional influences among teachers and their students. They offer insight into the dynamics that existed between students and the teacher in this physical education classroom. Results from this study will be presented in three broad themes: (a) ambiguity and risk in assessment, (b) assessment tasks and accountability, and (c) assessment and the student social system.

Ambiguity and risk in assessment

Ambiguity and risk are two important concepts in the ecological framework. An ambiguous task is not explicit and contains gaps in information about performance expectations. Field notes indicated that when given an assessment task, students did not receive information about a standard by which to judge their performance, nor the consequences for performance, which led to several students being confused not only about the assessment task but also what the teacher was actually assessing in each unit. After the completion of the units student comments indicated that they perceived that the teacher assessed them on their effort and teamwork. For example, one student, Mark stated:

You know I am thinking about that and I would say that she does the assessment on teamwork. I am not completely clear. But I think she is assessing it more on teamwork and effort, rather than the skills themselves.

Another student, Barbie, supported Mark’s comment, ‘Part of gym is learning how to work with others and get along in any situation and that is kind of a way of assessing a grade.’ Students also perceived that another reason for assessment was to assess their behavior. Brandon commented, ‘She assesses so she can see if you are actually listening, paying attention and making sure you are doing the best you can.’ Pete added, ‘She assesses so we are not just sitting there not knowing what to do.’

Other students perceived that the teacher was assessing their physical fitness. For example, Karen commented, ‘The teacher wants to know if you are fit and in good shape.’ Another student, Sara stated, ‘She assesses to see what you need to work on. To see how healthy you are.’ Since one of the units addressed fitness, it was reasonable that the students perceived that the teacher was assessing them on their level of fitness; however, field notes indicated that the teacher never informed the students of any standards by which to judge their performance on the fitness tests.
Although several students believed that they were being assessed on their level of physical fitness, effort, teamwork and behavior, other students still did not have a clear idea of what their teacher assessed in either unit. For example, Karen declared:

I think she assesses probably for a personal assessment of herself. She needs to know if she really taught us anything in this unit or is she just teaching us to hit a ball and watch us do it for eight weeks.

Another student, Brandon commented, ‘She needs to know what kinds of activities we can do.’ Gary added, ‘She assesses to see if you are learning or not or if you are just day dreaming.’

Even though there was a great deal of ambiguity for students regarding assessment tasks, there did not seem to be a lot of risk in performing the assessments. Risk refers to the interaction among the ambiguity of the task, its difficulty and the degree of accountability applied to it (Siedentop and Tannehill 2000). Usually if a task is ambiguous, it holds a high degree of risk; however, results from this study indicated that although the assessment tasks were ambiguous, the amount of risk was diminished because the students were only held accountable for completing the assessment tasks through teacher monitoring and the assessments were not used in an evaluative manner by the teacher to hold students accountable for learning in either unit.

Another reason that the assessments did not pose much risk to the students was because the assessment tasks were not difficult for most students. Many students were fairly skilled in the activities, as they had repeated the same activities for many years of their education. Mark commented, ‘I don’t get nervous with assessment because I know this well and have done it a lot and it is easy to do.’ Sara added, ‘I am not nervous about assessment because it is gym and it is not that hard because we have done all this before, so I am fine with it.’

Perhaps another reason that assessment tasks were ambiguous and lacked risk may have been the teacher’s assessment philosophy. When describing her philosophy, Mrs Nelson stated:

I don’t place a huge emphasis on assessment. I don’t like to judge kids on their physical abilities. I am against skill testing as a means for grading. I do more observing and look for if students work to improve. Not even how much they improved, but did they try to improve.

In addition, assessment tasks may have been ambiguous because Mrs Nelson did not plan for assessment. When asked how she planned for assessment, she replied, ‘To be honest with you, I don’t plan. I feel I should, but I don’t.’ Furthermore, Mrs Nelson consciously tried to decrease risk associated with assessment tasks through trying to make students feel comfortable with them. She stated:

Sometimes students are afraid to put themselves out there and do skills. I will have them pick partners for assessment tasks because they will be telling their partner things to correct and I want them to feel comfortable getting feedback from a peer they are comfortable with.

**Assessment tasks and accountability**

Formal accountability measures require students to produce learning outcomes. Furthermore, formal accountability measures are tied to a grade (Siedentop 1988; Tousignant and Siedentop 1983; Veal 1988b). Academic work in a classroom is embedded in an accountability structure defined by an exchange of performance for grades (Becker, Geer, and Hughes 1968). The students and their teacher did not view assessment as an important aspect of physical education. This may have been related to the lack of connection...
between assessments and students’ grades. Student comments reflected the lack of importance of assessment as an accountability technique. Mary stated, ‘I don’t really mind assessment. She just watches you. I mean it’s not like a test that counts. She just watches you.’ Sara added, ‘Sometimes, if you are being assessed you may feel that you are not doing well and you think they might mark you down, but I don’t really think that is true.’ Another student, Barbie, stated, ‘I mean it is physical education and it is important enough that you try at it but it is not important enough that you stress over how you are being assessed.’

Mrs Nelson held views about assessment that were similar to those of her students. She did not believe that assessment was an effective means to hold students accountable for learning in physical education; rather she believed assessments were a tool to motivate students and demonstrate their improvement. She stated, ‘I tell students that the peer assessment is for them to see how much they have improved. I don’t want them to put fake numbers on it because I am not going to judge their skill performance.’ She continued, ‘Assessments are primarily motivational and lets them see results.’

Mrs Nelson indicated that part of the reason that she did not use assessment to hold students accountable for learning was because of the difficulties she encountered administering the assessments and managing both the assessments and students’ behavior. She stated, ‘I don’t like to judge kids on their physical abilities and it is difficult when you have 36 kids and you are trying to assess and put it on paper while they are running all over on the field.’

Another reason she did not utilize assessment to hold students accountable was because as a physical education teacher she was not held accountable to assess because there was not a standardized test for physical education, such as in other disciplines. She commented, ‘I can do what I want in physical education. I think we have a broad enough spectrum where we can pretty much implement what we like because there is no Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessments Series Test in physical education.’

Assessment and the student social system

Students have an agenda in the classroom just as the teacher does. Often their agenda is manifested in the student social system. This system is typically arranged and directed by the students rather than the teacher (Carlson and Hastie 1997; Siedentop and Tannehill 2000). Results indicated that some assessment tasks in these units were supported by the student social system, which helped drive instruction; however, others were not. For example, in the volleyball unit several students found some assessments to be boring and not fun because they were not conducted during game play. This often led to students taking a great deal of time to do the assessment task by moving slowly while performing the task or not doing the task at all.

Field notes from day four provided an example of how the student social system influenced the effectiveness of the assessment tasks, as well as the managerial task system. On day four, students were very restless and took a great deal of time to get their groups organized for the assessments. Mrs Nelson stated, ‘David do you have your evaluation sheet for your team? You should have pencils for your team. Okay are there six people on David’s team? Anyone else on David’s team? Are there any more girls on David’s team?’ The students replied, ‘Yeah, Jane.’ Mrs Nelson continued, ‘Okay. I’ll wait again.’ Mrs Nelson continued to explain the assessment task once again to the team; however, the students continued to have a hard time getting organized and often distracted other students instead of focusing on the assessment task. In addition, Mrs Nelson continuously
prompted the students to work and had to contend with a significant amount of off-task behavior such as students chasing each other and kicking volleyballs.

Students revealed in interviews their dislike for assessments that were performed out of context. For example, Mike stated, ‘Assessment is boring because we really want to start playing and having fun with it, not really just like being tested on it.’ Ashley added, ‘Assessment is boring. One day we are playing volleyball, we are having fun playing and the next day in assessment we have to stand around and rotate.’ Mark added, ‘I like playing with points and against other people. I really don’t like assessment with passing it back and forth, it is boring.’ From these comments it is evident that the students’ agendas of socializing and having fun were not met by these assessment tasks and the students responded by manipulating the student social system in a manner that the assessment tasks would be ineffective and time-consuming.

Although the students found assessments performed out of context boring, they did enjoy the peer assessments, as they were able to have fun and socialize with their friends. Student comments indicated that the peer assessments were more effective because the students performed them with their friends. Sara commented, ‘Peer assessment was fun because it helped me because my friends would point things out. Things I needed to do so I would think about it more.’ Mike agreed with Sara, ‘Peer assessment was okay because I got to pair up and work with my friends.’ Furthermore the students enjoyed the peer assessment because there was less risk of being embarrassed with their friends if they did not perform appropriately. Mary stated, ‘If I messed up, it was okay. I could try again and my friends would help me to do it better.’

Overall, students reported that they believed that they worked harder because they got to work with their friends when doing the peer assessment. Gary stated, ‘The peer assessments helped me do the skills better. Like if I did something wrong my friends would tell me and I would improve it. I think it helped me learn more because my friends told me how.’ Karen added, ‘Peer assessment made me more successful with my friends watching over me and steering me in the right way if I did something wrong.’

**Discussion**

The ecological model provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of students and teachers over a period of time. Examining the findings of this study through an ecological lens allows for an examination of assessment and its connections to the ecology and the three task systems.

The instructional task system in this classroom was affected by multiple factors including, but not limited to, the manner in which assessment tasks were stated and developed. Assessment tasks as observed in this study were stated in ambiguous terms and the teacher never provided sufficient information regarding performance expectations. It was evident from the data that assessment tasks were stated ambiguously, and there was as well weak accountability with regard to their completion.

Previous research has indicated that students attempt to negotiate tasks that are ambiguous (Doyle 1986; Jones 1992; Siedentop and Tannehill 2000). These negotiations are attempts by students to decrease both the ambiguity of the task and the risk involved in performing the task. Students in physical education typically negotiate tasks by modifying them ‘downward’ to make it easier to be successful, or by modifying the task ‘upward’ to make it more challenging. If a task has a strong degree of accountability for its performance,
that is, students’ performance is tied to their grade, students will often attempt to negotiate the standards by which the task is evaluated to decrease the risk of scoring poorly. For example, if students were told they needed to have an average bowling score of 120 by the end of a unit to receive a favorable grade, they may attempt to verbally negotiate with the teacher to lower the score to 100.

Results from this study contradict previous research results indicating that students attempt to negotiate tasks that are ambiguous. In fact, results from this investigation indicated that students did not attempt to physically or verbally negotiate the assessment tasks. Perhaps one reason students did not attempt to negotiate the assessment tasks was that although the tasks were ambiguous, there was little risk as student performance was not subjected to strong accountability.

Assessment tasks were, however, modified through the student social system. Specifically, students tried to partner up with their friends in order to socialize, while at the same time performing assessment tasks. Students were compliant when performing the peer assessments because the peer assessments allowed them to pursue their social agenda, as well as perform the assessment in an environment that minimized embarrassment because of poor skill performance publicly observed. Rather, they performed for their friends, who provided feedback that was characterized by supportive positive comments. Results from this study indicated that students were much more receptive to receiving skill feedback from their peers than the teacher. Furthermore, feedback they received from peers appeared to motivate them to work harder to improve their performance. This finding supports findings from Carlson and Hastie (1997) that indicated students preferred to receive feedback from a peer coach to feedback from their physical education teacher.

In the case of assessments that were performed out of context, student social tasks often disrupted the instructional task system as well as the managerial task system. Students expressed a dislike for these assessments because they found them to be boring because they were not in the context of the game and minimized opportunities to pursue their social agenda.

As a result of their dislike for these assessments, students engaged in disruptive student social tasks such as becoming off-task, not paying attention or hitting balls out of the area of play. These behaviors resulted in the instructional task system being disrupted and the teacher spending an inordinate amount of time managing behavior. From the students’ perspective, these off-task behaviors created opportunities for them to socialize with their friends.

In addition to the instructional task system, the managerial task system was adversely affected by the student social system. The managerial task system was weakened by student social tasks (e.g., talking, not paying attention and hitting balls out of play), and further weakened by the struggles the teacher encountered while attempting to manage aspects of assessment tasks such as distributing written assessments and keeping all class members on task during skill assessments.

Previous research has indicated that management is a priority as well as, often, a challenge for teachers. In fact, teachers often place more importance on management than student learning (Hook and Tannehill 1995; Lund 1992; Placek 1983). A significant finding from this study was that some assessment tasks disrupted the flow of the class and made it difficult for the teacher to manage certain aspects of instruction, as well as the behavior of her students. This finding provides a different perspective on why teachers may be reluctant to use assessment. Earlier research has indicated that teachers don’t assess for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, large class size, lack of knowledge regarding valid and reliable assessments (Lund 1993) and a lack of value for assessment.
(Kneer 1986). However, previous research has not indicated that teachers may not perform assessment because assessment tasks may make it more difficult for them to manage their classroom and instruction.

**Conclusion**

Results of this study provide us with insights into the perceptions of middle school students and their teacher about assessment, as well as the role assessment plays in the ecology of physical education. Although the study is limited in scope in that participants included only one intact seventh-grade class and their teacher, it does provide us with some interesting information about middle school students’ and their teacher’s perceptions of assessment and how assessment tasks influenced both the students’ and teacher’s agenda in the classroom.

The findings of this study extend previous work in this area (James, Griffin, and France 2005) and suggest that assessment has the potential to enhance the teaching–learning process. It appears that assessments that accommodate students’ agendas of socializing and having fun have a great deal of promise for promoting task engagement as well as learning.

Specific recommendations for practice include designing assessments that are implemented in the context of the activity. For example, results from this study indicated that assessments that were conducted in game-like contexts or real-life situations were more meaningful and enjoyable for students because they accommodated students’ social agenda of having fun while being active with their friends.

Furthermore, teachers should examine the degree of accountability that is tied to assessment tasks. Since ambiguity and risk are closely linked to accountability, it seems logical that applying a high degree of accountability to an assessment task, such as tying assessments to student grades, would increase the risk of performing the task and students would value the assessment more because in a sense, it becomes a ‘high stakes’ assessment.

Assessment tasks in this study did not have strong accountability (e.g., linking students’ performance to grades), which resulted in the assessment tasks having little effect on student performance or learning. This was unfortunate because research results have indicated that when assessment of performance is linked to students’ grades, student performance rate increases markedly (Doyle 1986). Furthermore, researchers have found that tasks with stronger accountability linked to grades were related to higher achievement gains (Silverman, Kulinna, and Crull 1995).

Future research should be conducted that examines the role of different types of authentic assessments used at different educational levels to discover the role these assessments play in the ecology of physical education. In addition, research that examines the ecology of classrooms that link performance on assessment tasks to student grades needs to investigated. Results of this research may serve as an impetus to begin a philosophical shift in physical education that would lead to both students and teachers finding value in assessment tasks that enhance both teaching and learning.

**References**


